

Live Strong: Our Roots, Routes, and Relationship to Real Food and the Necessary Return to Organic Living

by Courtney-Savali L. Andrews



IT'S SUMMERTIME! And among the many wonderful things that this season brings are the frequent opportunities to come together in the open outdoor spaces for time-treasured moments involving food and fellowship. In many communities, it all goes down at the Annual Church Picnic where old friends and new acquaintances rock with the choir, hear a word, enjoy in friendly competition, and parade tables spread with famous family-guarded recipes from the grill to the dessert table that runneth over.

While this multigenerational occasion is usually a site that reflects Christian expressions of healthy relationships inclusive of love, unity, sharing, and outreach, in another light it is the site of troubling entanglements with a series of unhealthy relationships continuing to affect the health and overall well-being of our African American communities. The penalties of these entanglements present a very different picture of the church picnic—one that exposes snapshots of a generation of baby-boomers afflicted with degenerative diseases such as Type-2 Diabetes and Heart Disease, children struggling with Obesity, food deserts in low-income communities bereft of healthy food and fresh produce, unemployment, and an overall relationship with food that is doing more harm to our health than soothing the soul.¹

Nothing in this picture is breaking news. Most of us, according to the numbers provided by the US Office of Minority Health, are in close relationship—if not experiencing it ourselves—with one of more of these unhealthy situations. News outlets, politicians, church and community programs, neighbors, family, and friends are all talking about food and health in some form or another, and yet the numbers reflect that “in 2008, the death rate for African Americans was higher than Whites for heart diseases, stroke, cancer, and diabetes”² in the United States because there are disconnections in the overall conversation. Trendy keywords flash before us: Organic, Processed, Vegan, Fast Food, All Natural, No Dairy, GMOs, Soul Food, Pescatarian, Food Allergies, Wholemeal, Sustainability, Food Industrial Complex, Farmers Market, Homemade, Alternative Food Options, High-Fructose Corn Syrup, Eat Green, Food Deserts, Community Gardens, Whole Foods, Gluten Free, Healthy, Real Food, Vegetarian, Urban Farming, etc. And while these words are laden with meaning, much of the conversations are lost in translation. The impact of missing out on these conversations are grave and outline the disasters in overconsumption of the wrong food and little to no access of real food.

There are complicated reasons for this and far too many to dissect in one article. However, what I wish to bring into focus here is that whatever the reasons are, the penalties reflect that we are disconnected from overcoming our battles with food, health, and food accessibility because we are not yet clear in our understandings of these themes on conceptual, cultural, and/or structural

levels. In order to address the need to source quality foods for a healthier community, we must first address the problems of the meanings, perceptions, and purposes that food and health represent for us.

The first section of the article focuses on the abovementioned themes by digging up the ROOTS to explore the meanings of food and eating as theological or faith-based concepts, reclaiming our ROUTES as “pioneers” of the organic-eat local agrarian sustainability movement, and identifying toxic RELATIONSHIPS in our perceptions of who is entitled to healthy living and a just food system.

The second section is action-oriented and highlights the wide range of program initiatives and resources provided by government, church, and community organizations in various locations—all returning to organic living that establishes a closer relationship to the soil, the source of all food, and a stronger reliance on each other.

OUR ROOTS, ROUTES, AND RELATIONSHIP TO REAL FOOD

You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills, giving drink to every wild animal... You cause the grass to grow for the cattle and plants for people to use to bring forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart.

—Psalm 104:10-15 (NRSV)

Food, Glorious Food: A faith-based concept

As we gather around the table before a meal to bow our heads and say grace to give thanks and praise for the provisions that God has made, many of us have a shallow understanding of the purpose for food in the grand scheme of God’s creation. We are often disconnected from paying attention to and reflecting on the web of intimate relationships that the Psalmist above describes as we partake of our food. Professor of Theology and Ecology at Duke University, Norman Wirzba says, “We can forget that food is one of God’s basic and abiding means for expressing divine provision and care.”

In his book Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating, Wirzba offers a Christian perspective that situates real food and eating firmly within the realm of the goodness of God’s creation. (Unless otherwise noted, by the term “food” I mean what I am calling “real food” mentioned in the title of this article.) Wirzba writes,

Food is about the relationships that join us to the earth, fellow creatures, loved ones and guests, and ultimately God. How we eat testifies to whether we value the creatures we live with and depend upon. To eat is to savor *and* struggle with the mystery of creatureliness. When our eating is mindful, we celebrate the goodness of fields, gardens, forests and watersheds, and the skill of those who can nurture seed and animal life into delicious food. We acknowledge and honor God as the giver of every good and perfect gift. But we also learn to

correct our own arrogance, boredom, and ingratitude. Eating invites people to develop a deeper appreciation for where they are and who they are with so that their eating can be a sacramental rather than a sacrilegious act. A thoughtful, theological relation to food makes possible the discovery that eating is among the most intimate and pleasing ways possible for us to enter into the memberships of creation and find there the God who daily blesses and feeds life.³

From this point of view, the concept and purpose of food go far beyond the idea that God provides it as sustenance and fuel alone to keep our “machine-like” bodies running at peak performance. Rather, food is a symbol of God’s continual process of creation. “The very food that is given by God for our nourishment has required death of another participant in God’s creation—whether plant or animal, yeast, microbe or fungus—and those lives in turn have required the deaths of others. To be fully cognizant of the gravity of the gift of food, then, should cause our eating to be both humble and grateful.”⁴

The further we are from understanding the source of our food and the process of the overall food system from which it comes, the more remote we are from participating in the gift of life itself. Because we have largely left our food systems in the hands of global corporations and the government, we have surrendered our nurturing relationship with all living things in exchange for quick, cheap, convenient, and poisonous “food.”

However, Wirzba suggests that there is a way that right relationship can be restored. By showing love, care, nurturing attention, and time in growing, producing, and preparing food, one is mirroring God’s love and care for creation by providing and sharing God’s bounty with others. In other words, we need to stop the behavior of being solely consumers of “food” products, and return to the intimate involvement of producing and preparing food for our communities. The author warns us,

Failing this practical involvement we will not appreciate the many requirements and costs of food, costs that go well beyond the sticker price. We will not know the health benefits (to us and to fellow creatures) that follow from particular kinds of food production and harvest. Nor will we be able to advocate for a just and sustainable food system, a system in which fields and waters are protected, animals are humanely treated, and workers are safe and paid a living wage.⁵

Similarly, the solutions for providing local access to fresh and healthy foods, curbing the numbers of obese citizens and chronic diseases, and establishing better relationships with one another rest in returning to an organic lifestyle and working in the garden.

Ball of Confusion: The Latest in Food Lingo

Whether we are shopping the aisles of our supermarkets, contemplating the “healthy” menu options at the drive-thru window, or bartering for seeds at our nearest community garden, the latest labels associated with food can be confusing and overwhelming. As listed above, there are plenty of words that are used to convince us of a particular quality and process through which

our food is presented to us. The most common of these words are *Organic* and *Natural*. In some cases, these items are found in an isolated section or specialty store (Whole Foods Market, Trader Joes, or a health food store) for customers interested in the *Alternative* food options.

“The way we think about food depends on how we name and narrate the world in which we eat,” Wirzba says. The fact that labels like *Organic* and *Natural* come underneath the category of *Alternative* reflect that we are out of sync with the natural world that God created for us to live off of. In this case, “real food” is now identified by unregulated labels like “organic” and “natural” to suggest “that the food has been grown in safe and healthy soil using natural fertilizers free of synthetic pesticides or additives.”⁶

While these labels might sound safe and acceptable, many of the industrial crops that source organic fruits and vegetables have done so by planting genetically modified organism seeds, known as GMOs. On the surface, there is no way to tell the difference between the traditional varieties and their genetically modified cousins. However, there are identity markers found in the numeric codes on the label that will help you know which seeds to plant in your own garden; make sure that they are **NOT GMO seeds**. Instead, look for heirloom seeds, which are non-hybrid, natural seeds that have lasted for at least three generations.

A Recipe for Disaster: Food Deserts, Obesity, and Chronic Diseases

Millions of people in the United States live in food deserts, making access to fresh and healthy foods difficult to attain and or expensive. Bryant Terry, food activist, chef, and author of [Vegan Soul Kitchen](#), plainly states in the PBS documentary [Soul Food Junkies](#), “In America, there is a class-based apartheid in the food system and if you live in low-income communities, there is often very little healthy food.” On the other hand, there is an abundance of fast-food restaurants and convenience stores that line the city blocks for miles. I believe there is a connection between residents who live in food deserts and their prevalence of obesity and chronic diseases such as Type-2 diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease. However, a direct correlation between residence location, food accessibility, and chronic disease has remained questionable in studies that imply that the problem is not food deserts but rather a food oasis, where there are so many choices that increased amounts of fruits and vegetables eaten do not substitute but are added to the existing poor diet. Thus, the fruit and vegetables have little positive affect in lessening obesity and chronic diseases in these communities.

In 2009, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) conducted a 1-year study to assess the extent of areas with limited access to affordable and nutritious food, identify characteristics and causes of such areas, consider how limited access affects local populations, and outline recommendations to address the problem. The summary of their findings was compiled in the report entitled [Access to Affordable and Nutritious Food—Measuring and Understanding Food Deserts and Their Consequences: Report to Congress](#). The results of the study found the following conclusions:⁷

- *Access to a supermarket or large grocery store is a problem for a small percentage of households.* Results indicate that some consumers are constrained in their ability to access affordable nutritious food because they live far from a supermarket or large grocery store and do

not have easy access to transportation. Urban core areas with limited food access are characterized by higher levels of racial segregation and greater income inequality. In small-town and rural areas with limited food access, the lack of transportation infrastructure is the most defining characteristic. These area- or distance-based results are in line with a nationally representative survey of US households conducted in 2001. Responses to direct questions about food access show that nearly 6 percent of all US households did not always have the food they wanted or needed because of access-related problems. More than half of these households also lacked enough money for food. It is unclear whether food access or income constraints were greater barriers for these households.

- *Supermarkets and large grocery stores have lower prices than smaller stores.* A key concern for people who live in areas with limited access is that they rely on small grocery or convenience stores that may not carry all the foods needed for a healthy diet and that may offer these foods and other food at higher prices.

- *Low-income households shop where food prices are lower, when they can.* Low- and middle-income households are more likely to purchase food at supercenters, where prices are lower.

The study also examined food shopping behavior and the types of food purchased for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participants and other low-income households. Data from the 1996/1997 NFSPS show that SNAP participants were, on average, 1.8 miles from the nearest supermarket. However, the average number of miles both SNAP participants and eligible nonparticipants traveled to the store most often used was 4.9 miles. Participants who did not shop at supermarkets purchased less noncanned fruit, noncanned vegetables, and milk than SNAP participants who shopped frequently at a supermarket.

- *Easy access to all food, rather than lack of access to specific healthy foods, may be a more important factor in explaining increases in obesity.* The findings are mixed—some show a small but positive increase in consumption of fruits and vegetables, while others show no effect. The causal pathways linking limited access to nutritious food to measures of being overweight, like Body Mass Index (BMI) and obesity, are not well understood. Several studies find that proximity of fast food restaurants and supermarkets are correlated with BMI and obesity. But increased consumption of such healthy foods as fruits and vegetables, low-fat milk, or whole grains does not necessarily lead to lower BMI. Consumers may not substitute away from less healthy foods when they increase their consumption of healthy foods. Easy access to all food, rather than lack of access to specific healthy foods, may be a more important factor in explaining increases in BMI and obesity.

- *Understanding the market conditions that contribute to differences in access to food is critical to the design of policy interventions that may be effective in reducing access limitations.* Access to affordable and nutritious food depends on supply (availability) and consumer demand. Consumer behavior, preferences, and other factors related to the demand for some foods may account for differences in the types of foods offered across different areas. Food retailer behavior and supply-side issues such as higher costs to developing stores in underserved areas may also explain variation across areas in which foods are offered and what stores offer them. If high development costs serve as a barrier to entry for supermarkets in some areas with low access,

then subsidy programs or restructured zoning policies may be effective solutions. If consumer demand factors, such as inadequate knowledge of the nutritional benefits of specific foods, contribute to differences in access by reducing demand, then a public health campaign may be a preferred strategy.

As a key figure in the advocacy of making quality food accessible and educating the nation's youth on the relationships between food and health, First Lady Michelle Obama has offered much to the efforts to affect change on these issues. She has aided in both government and private institutional studies, influenced the overhaul of menu items offered in school lunch programs, and created and planned the White House FRESHFARM Farmers Market. The 2009 USDA report mentioned above also states that as a tool for community development, food "projects such as farmers' markets, community gardens, promotion of culturally specific foods for ethnic minorities and Native Americans, local food production and promotion, youth agricultural and culinary training programs, and many other types of programs have all been implemented in a variety of settings, both urban and rural. The USDA's Community Food Projects Competitive Grant program has much experience in funding and nurturing such programs."

However, as the First Lady and many others work diligently to provide low-income, affluent, urban, and rural residents alike with fresh, healthy, and local foods, their efforts remained challenged by those of us who struggle with the overall meanings, perceptions, and purpose of food, and thus still make poor food choices when healthy options are available.

Old Habits Die Hard . . . But I'm Too Young to Die: Food Choice and Cultural Identity

For many of us, food is symbolic of a multitude of personal meanings that are connected to cultural identity. Food identifies time and history, place—from region to town to city or neighborhood—and defines events, social relationships, and individuals by the food they prepare, serve, and consume.⁸ Michael Owen Jones notes that,

Often food is invested with emotions. . . . Food is a friend, a consolation, a hobby, a companion. . . . People use food as a reward and withhold it as a punishment. They give food as an expression of sympathy and support when a friend is ill or suffers death in the family.⁹

Accordingly, the social and cultural factors associated with food influence the attitudes and behaviors related to nutrition—especially when considering altering or shifting eating habits. In a case study involving African Americans in north central Florida, focus groups discussed concepts of healthful eating, barrier and motivational factors of healthy eating, and the channels through which the community receives nutrition information.

The results of the study resonate beyond this focus group and echo throughout our wider community and that of other people of color. The general perception is that 'eating healthfully' means giving up part of your cultural heritage and trying to conform to the dominant culture and that altering your eating habits threatens the legacy of traditional cooking methods and recipes passed down from one generation to the next. The barriers to eating a healthy diet also include

the idea that the social and cultural symbolism of certain foods and food spaces, i.e. farmers' markets, community gardens, and general agrarian life, are for a specific privileged people not inclusive of people of color. In other words, healthy eating and farmers' markets are things that white people along with the entitled others who can afford it and mind the lack of flavor.

What is troubling about these perceptions is that they are limiting the scope of our rich cultural identities and traditional knowledge systems while *still* conforming, though unconsciously, to the dominant cultural products of commodification, i.e. the industrialization of our food system and cultural amnesia. These are the roots of the harmful entanglements with unhealthy relationships that I mentioned at the beginning of this article.

Sickness and inequalities in our communities thrive because we have forgotten about our historical and theological connections to the soil that gave us the cycle of life and death. There is nothing but dysfunction in a system where many would be sick and at the same time unknowingly possess the legacy that would heal the sickness and also pass on the gift of life as a responsible and grateful member of God's creation.

So what do we do? We find our roots, routes, and relationship to real food in first seeking a theological understanding of food as God's gift for our lives. Second, we return to the garden to establish a right relationship with creation, reclaim our traditional knowledge and identity as skillful agrarians, and move back into the space of organic living. It is Sankofa: "There is no shame in going back to fetch what you have left behind, or to return and correct the mistake"!¹⁰

Let's Go Back to the Old-time Way: Survival and Understanding in the Garden

We have gone back to beginnings of time to understand God's hand in creation and what that means in the form of food production and purpose in eating. In Norman Wirzba's Food and Faith, he argues, "gardens are indispensable for the flourishing of terrestrial life because gardens and the geo-bio-chemical process they embody are the places where life's many hungers are met."¹¹ In another light, the historical narrative of the African American cannot be told without mentioning the fact that "the original accumulation of capital used in industry in the United States and Europe came from the extraction of wealth from colonies, piracy, and the African slave trade."¹² Slavery brought millions to the US to spend their waking hours laboring in the 'gardens'. In Land & Power: Sustainable Agriculture and African Americans, Mart Stewart reminds us,

...but this labor gave them knowledge of the land that was intimate and precise, and in turn, had material, social, and political usefulness (e.g. nutrition and small profit from gardening, hunting and crafts). For African American slaves, the wilderness was a place of potential deliverance—a site of healing, a meeting spot, a place where a decisive edge of resources could be added to meager plantation rations, and a place where salvation could be gained, either through worship in the holler, through the strengthening of kin connections, or through stealing oneself away permanently.¹³

As a Christian of African American heritage, the purpose and symbolic meanings of the garden intersect from these two conceptual points made above. Both sites in the garden symbolize survival, telling us that metaphorically and realistically survival starts and ends in the garden.

To this point, there is cultural significance in researching the legacy of black agrarian and ecological knowledge rooted in Africa and expanded in the Americas by slaves. That significance extends from the black landowners and tenant farmers at Tuskegee, to the useful and practical farming inventions of George Washington Carver that made him a trailblazer for the current discourse on sustainable farming.

Tracing a wider understanding of African heritage traditional diets and the similarities and differences found in our understanding of soul food will allow us to try and embrace variations on our cuisine without compromising our cultural identity. As African American food activists and chefs work together to address the issues discussed throughout this article, numerous resources have been made available to re-embrace a healthier lifestyle that we as a people once knew.

THE NECESSARY RETURN TO ORGANIC LIVING

I Need You to Survive: The Resource Pages

This section highlights the wide range of program initiatives and resources provided by government, church, and community organizations in various locations—all returning to organic living that establishes a closer relationship to the soil, the source of all food, and a stronger reliance on each other. While the first section dealt largely with THINKING about food and threats to our health and food systems, this section is provided to direct you into ACTION within or in partnership with other ministries and community organizations.

Church Ministry and Community Partnership Models

The African American Church is historically emblematic as an institution of activism and mobilization in social justice, health, and community initiatives. As efforts intensify to fight disease and obesity while educating communities on gardening and healthy eating, large-scale project grants have been given to churches in partnership with a network of organizations (universities, hospitals, gardening clubs, farmers' markets/share croppers, Michelle Obama Let's Move program) and funded by the US Government.

In 2010, six churches in Seattle, Washington were awarded the *Moving Together in Faith and Health Grant* through the University of Washington School of Nursing Program funded by the Department of Health and Human Services under the Obama Administration's initiative to fight against childhood obesity, alcoholism, and tobacco use. A number of interactive partners and programming were involved in this program including the planting of several community gardens in the youth Just Garden Program and the creation of a faith-based gardening curriculum. For more information, go to <http://infaithandhealth.org/>.

Earlier this year, the National Baptist Convention was challenged by Michelle Obama to appoint 10,000 Health Ambassadors across the denomination to meet three goals:

1. Reverse the trends we see in our congregational health
2. Become the healthiest denomination within the next 10 years
3. Have Health Ambassadors make a difference

The denomination's goal was to have 10,000 Health Ambassadors functioning in each congregation by September 2012. For more information, go to <http://www.nationalbaptist.com>.

Community Supported Agriculture Programs

Over the last 20 years, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) has become a popular way for consumers to buy local, seasonal food directly from a farmer. Here are the basics: a farmer offers a certain number of "shares" to the public. Typically, the share consists of a box of vegetables, but other farm products may be included. Interested consumers purchase a share (a.k.a. a "membership" or a "subscription") and in return receive a box (bag, basket) of seasonal produce each week throughout the farming season. Every state has a CSA program. For more information on choosing a CSA program or mapping other options for local foods in your area, go to <http://www.localharvest.org>.

Free Seeds and Gardening Supplies

The Dinner Garden provides seeds, gardening supplies, and gardening advice **free of charge** to all people in the United States of America. They assist those in need in establishing food security for their families. Their goal is for people to plant home, neighborhood, and container gardens so they can use the vegetables they grow for food and income. For more information, go to <http://www.dinnergarden.org/>.

The America the Beautiful Fund provides free vegetable and flower seeds. For more information, go to http://america-the-beautiful.org/free_seeds/index.php.

WinterSown provides free group seed packets to help groups and persons to achieve their goals by providing seed to grow for educational use, fund-raising plant sales, family, community or food bank gardens, and beautification projects. For more information, go to http://www.wintersown.org/wseo1/Free_Seeds.html.

Suggested Documentaries

- *Forks Over Knives* (2011), directed by Lee Fulkerson. This film examines the profound claim that most, if not all, of the degenerative diseases that afflict us can be controlled, or even reversed, by rejecting our present menu of animal-based and processed food.
- *Soul Food Junkies* (2011), directed by Byron Hurt. To many African Americans, soul food is sacrament, ritual, and a key expression of cultural identity. But does this traditional cuisine do more harm to health than it does to soothe the soul?

● Super Size Me (2004), directed by Morgan Spurlock. While examining the influence of the fast food industry, Morgan Spurlock personally explores the consequences on his health of a diet of solely McDonald's food for one month.

Suggested Reading

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Wirzba, Norman. Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Foodways and Cookbooks

Terry, Bryant. Vegan Soul Kitchen: Fresh, Healthy, and Creative African-American Cuisine. Food activist, author, and chef Bryant Terry has done an accomplished job of drawing on mostly Southern and African traditions in a creative way, retaining cultural complexity while making vegan food with a distinctive soul food twist to it.

African Heritage Food Pyramid by Old Ways: Health through Heritage. This pyramid celebrates the individual foods and traditional healthy eating patterns of African Heritage, with roots in the American South, Africa, the Caribbean, or South America. Online location: <http://www.oldwayspt.org/resources/heritage-pyramids/african-diet-pyramid>.

African Heritage Diet Pyramid



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Notes

1. Soul Food Junkies (2011). Directed by Byron Hurt. Debut on PBS Independent Lens Oct 2012.
2. Full disclosure of health statistics for the African American Community on the US Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health website, <http://minorityhealth.hhs.gov/templates/browse.aspx?lvl=2&lvlID=51>.
3. Wirzba, Norman. Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2011. p. 4.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Definition of organic from <http://www.askdrsears.com/topics/family-nutrition/organic>.
7. From the USDA Access to Affordable and Nutritious Food—Measuring and Understanding Food Deserts and Their Consequences: Report to Congress. To see the full report, go to http://www.ers.usda.gov/media/242675/ap036_1.pdf.
8. Jones, Michael Owen. “Food Choice, Symbolism, and Identity: Bread and Butter Issues for Folkloristics and Nutrition Studies.” Journal of American Folklore (American Folklore Society) 120, no. 476 (2007). p. 134.
9. Ibid., p. 135.
10. This is an Akan term with a few translations in prevalent use.
11. Food and Faith, Preface.
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